

South Beach: At the Turning Point

Can Deco, development save city?

BEACH /from I.A.
pipes in South Beach's residential areas.

The side streets are changing as developers buy and restore dilapidated apartment houses. The renovations bring substantial rent increases, but buildings such as the Fenimore near Flamingo Park have rented quickly. Most new residents are drawn by the 15-minute commute to downtown Miami and by the district's historic charms.

Designation as a historic district places South Beach in a class with Georgetown in Washington, D.C., Greenwich Village in New York City and the French Quarter of New Orleans.

More than anyone, preservationist Barbara Capitman is credited with getting the federal government to recognize the district's keepsakes. Now, eight years after winning the historic designation fight, Capitman advocates making South Beach a time capsule of the 1930s, just the way Williamsburg, Va., preserves colonial America. "People love historic Williamsburg," Capitman said. "Williamsburg is always thronged with people and it doesn't have Florida's beaches and weather. I believe the Art Deco District will thrive on cultural tourism."

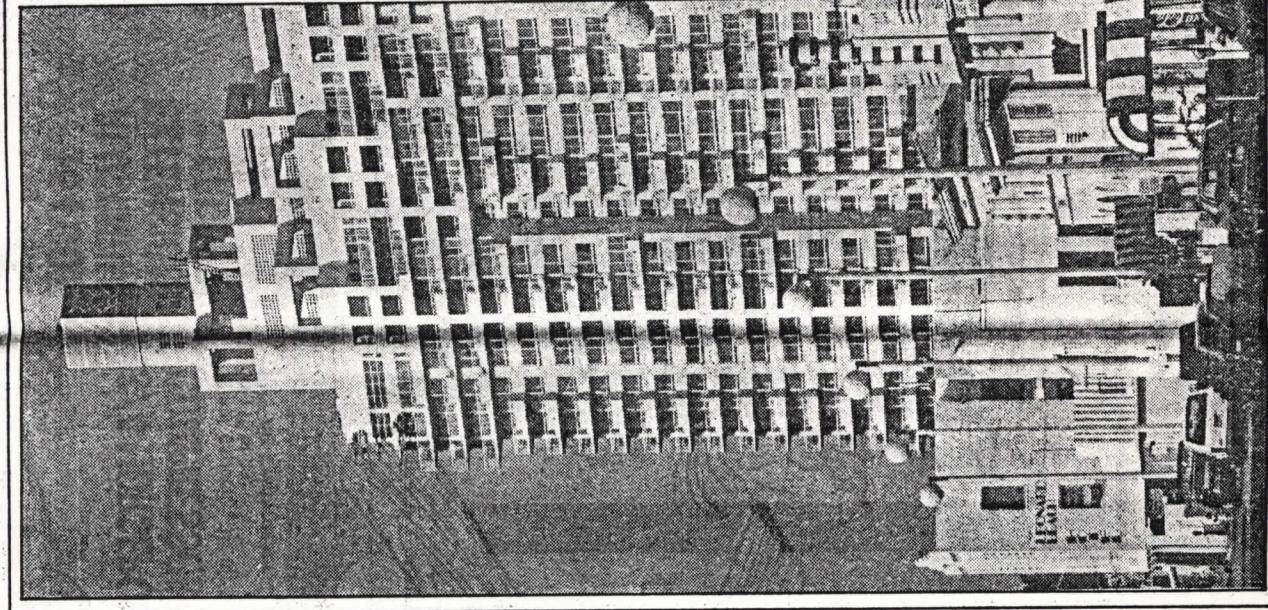
But problems persist

Despite the overnight acclaim, South Beach remains a troubled area. The maladies of aging, poverty and crime plague many of the 46,000 people who crowd the neighborhood's 232 blocks. Some families live five to a room in battered apartments. Drug dealers and prostitutes keep prospering despite stepped-up police enforcement.

Increasingly, the neighborhood's social service agencies are shifting their focus to the young and poor and away from the old and infirm. Since 1980, young Latins have replaced elderly Jewish residents as the area's dominant group.

"This is land of milk and honey," said Miami Beach Mayor Alex Daoud, "but it is a land of opportunity. We are looking for new people who are willing to leave the suburban comfort zone and take a chance on the city. We have some great deals here, deals that wouldn't exist if things were perfect."

Investors seem ready to gamble on imperfection. Twenty-seven South Beach hotels changed hands last year, a number surpassed only once in the past 22 years. Designers in a *Architectural Record* article



are getting better, but not here."

Elaine White, 35, and Nelson Bentancur, 30, have an apartment six blocks south of Katz and Feldman, yet they describe a different South Beach.

"There are police around wherever you go," Bentancur said. "I walk around at night, and I never feel like it's not safe," White added.

The two live in a newly renovated building on Drexel Avenue. White, who grew up in western Michigan, said she loves the close contacts of urban life.

"It's like a real hometown," she said. "You can walk to the markets and to the beach.... I like the idea of being a pioneer. I think I'd buy a place here if the right deal came along."

As pioneers, White and Bentancur staked their claim close to the fort, in this case the Miami Beach Police Station. In March, the police headquarters moved from the island's southern tip to Washington Avenue and 11th Street.

Since 1983, Miami Beach's crime rate has increased 18 percent. Fifty-eight percent of that crime occurred in South Beach, where about half the city's people live.

"We've only been open a month and we already had a big break-in," complained Juan Martinez, manager of the Decoletable antique shop on 14th Street. "I'm all for cops walking the beat. I'm here because I see positive change happening. Still, I'm afraid people will see this as a ghetto if they can't stop the crime."

'Battle for territory'

Yet restaurant owners and hoteliers from Ocean Drive to Washington Avenue say crime is decreasing as the neighborhood's nightlife expands.

"I see this as a battle for territory," said Pieter Bakker, who is restoring the Fairmont Hotel and an adjacent apartment building on Collins Avenue. "As the good people push out the undesirable, the whole area will come back."

Most in South Beach's new business class say the district will begin to bustle within two years. In five years, they say, the neighborhood will rival New Orleans' Bourbon Street for nightlife.

Western Hemisphere, complete with grandiose sketches of man-made canals lined by hotels, shops, restaurants and people. The plan ushered in a building and renovation ban that lasted until 1983. The moratorium was supposed to be the first step in the razing and rebuilding of the neighborhood. Instead, it was a giant leap in the direction of decay.

South Pointe today is a web of substandard dwellings and residents plagued with a wide range of social and medical ills. Yet it is also site of a new luxury condominium development. South Pointe Towers. Plans for the \$35-million project call for four high-rise apartment buildings, a hotel and street-level shops overlooking Government Cut. Early this month, a lender filed foreclosure proceedings against the development's first-phase building. The suit is under negotiation.

"I don't know why Joe's survived," owner Jo Ann Sawitz said. "My only explanation is that Joe's is bigger than a restaurant. It has a special place in this city. It has had a national reputation for 50 years."

Sawitz is convinced that South Pointe will become prosperous. In preparation, she has bought lots around the restaurant that someday might be used for parking garages or sold for a profit.

While the city treasures Joe's, it hopes developers will tear down almost everything else in South Pointe and build anew. To that end, the City Commission leased waterfront parkland for construction of two restaurants. The commission argued that the concession of public land would help draw more investment nearby.

Also, city zoning law prohibits restoring most of South Pointe's buildings. The law effectively encourages demolition and reconstruction of the entire neighborhood.

"We are taking our public land and our public authority and using them to coax the redevelopment of the area," city planner Jud Kurian cheek said. "We're hoping private

once in the past 22 years. Designation as a federal historic district and real estate speculation sparked 32 hotel sales in 1980.

The Miami Beach Development Corp., a nonprofit company created by the city to promote South Beach, is continually updating its list of neighborhood property transactions.

Seeking city's revival.

"We're rebuilding a city," said Woody Gruber, spokesman for the development corporation. "It's just the beginning. Ocean Drive is coming alive, and new restaurants are opening on Washington Avenue." At night, Jazz at The Waldorf, Cafe des Arts and The Tropics International offer trendy menus and music near the middle of Ocean Drive. All three opened in the past year. Horse-drawn carriages clatter down the street in the evening, often carrying men in tuxedos and women in white silk dresses. On Washington Avenue, two blocks west of Ocean Drive, The Strand restaurant offers New American cuisine and is often crowded until early morning.

"The nascent nightlife is attracting people who had shunned the Beach."

"I was really surprised," said Debbie Mello, a Kendall resident who made a first visit to Ocean Drive's new clubs on Memorial Day weekend. "South Beach used to be totally dead."

Mello's surprise is shared by many. Two years ago, music on the street boomed, from ghetto blasters, and liquor came in low-cost prints. Today, jazz waits through the open windows of busy bistros, and stylish couples drink French champagne.

The city's contribution to the comeback is a \$3 million bond issue to rebuild Ocean Drive, widen the sidewalk and renovate Lummus Park. Work began on the park two weeks ago. The city also has spent \$9.5 million reconstructing streets and replacing water

caused the network. They say the Miami Beach business establishment isn't attuned to their market and their tenuous beginning.

"The local money has heard bad news from South Beach for so long that they don't want to hear from us," said Woody Vondrecek, president of The Network and owner of a Washington Avenue print shop. "Most of the people coming here are pioneers. They are eating macaroni and cheese while the district gets going. They don't fit well in the Miami Beach power structure."

The new businessmen rely on the patronage of tourists and other pioneers. Many come from the urban Northeast and enjoy South Beach's mix of ethnic and economic groups. It is more akin to Manhattan's Lower East Side than to Kendall. It is also one of the few places in Florida where foot travel is considered normal.

Christopher Reda, 24, an artist who works as a waiter at The Strand restaurant, recently bought an apartment in the district. His only transportation is a bicycle.

'Easy to get around'

"This is a nice, small town, and it's easy to get around," Reda said one afternoon while putting the finishing touches on a mural in a soon-to-open Washington Avenue shoe store. "I just moved down here from Hoboken, South Beach is the only reason I came."

Artists have shown an exceptional interest in the Beach, staging a textbook takeover of Lincoln Road Mall at the Deco district's northern extreme.

Parts of Lincoln Road Mall, once called the Fifth Avenue of the South, are shuttered and vacant. But on the mall's west end, art galleries have opened under yellow awnings. They are part of the South Florida Arts Center, an assemblage of 85 artists who teach, practice and sell their work.

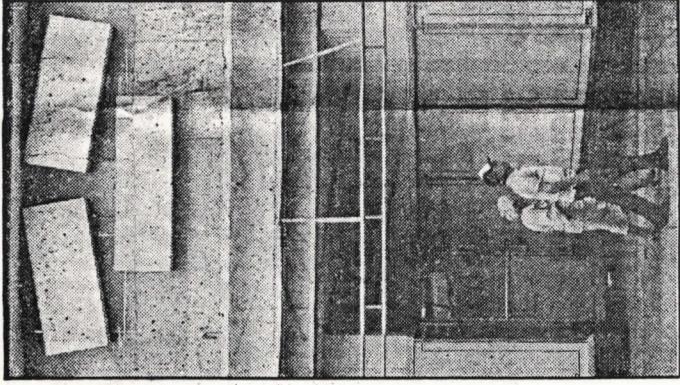
The Colony, an abandoned neighborhood movie theater, reopened last year as a repertory theater at Lincoln Road and Lenox

PAST AND FUTURE

Above: The new South Pointe Towers complex looms over the Ocean Drive structures of another day.

At left: Parts of Lincoln Road Mall are still deserted despite an infusion of life from the South Florida artist community.

Photographs by Brian Smith



Avenue. Just to the east on the mall, arts patron Mitchell Wolfson occupies the former Bonwit Teller building near the eastern edge of the arts district.

The fledgling Miami City Ballet occupies quickly where the mall meets the side streets. Hyman Katz, an 82-year-old retired New Yorker who lives half a block off Lincoln Road, said he regrets having moved to South Beach.

"Miami Beach is gone. It's finished. It will be dead for the rest of the century," Katz said.

Sitting in front of his Pennsylvania Avenue apartment building, "Look at Flamingo Park. People used to go down there every day to play shuffleboard. You used to wait hours for a game. Now, nobody's left to play."

"Everything is changing, and it's changing for the worse. Older people these days won't come here. You can't even give the condominiums away in this neighborhood. If you could, I'd leave."

Gizelle Feldman, 85, who was seated close to Katz, said the fear of crime rules her life. "I never feel comfortable," she said. "We have so many hoodlums on the street. They follow you along Washington Avenue. There are more of them now than ever. Maybe some parts of South Beach

neighborhood win rival new Orleans Bourbon Street for nightlife. "I'm so sure this area will change that I'd like to buy every significant building in it," said preservationist Gerry Sanchez.

South Beach's most publicized entrepreneur: "When the season of the pioneer ends, the cost of buildings here will be incredible." Pioneering is risky, Club Ovo at the Warsaw Ballroom, which opened on Espanola Way a year ago, closed this month. Richard Bedrosian, the club's manager, said Ovo was successful initially, then suffered from competition with two nearby night spots, Club Nu and 1235.

"When you open up a nightclub this size in a region of five million, you are looking at about 200,000 as possible clients. That really isn't very many," Bedrosian said.

'Scummy' area feared

In 1985, the City Commission passed an ordinance designating part of the national historic district as a city preservation zone. Under the law, a building can't be demolished for six months after a permit is approved. Last month, a major South Beach developer announced that it would do just that. The Royale Group, owner of the Carlyle, Leslie and Cardozo hotels, plans to demolish the Senator, a Collins Avenue hotel that Art Deco enthusiasts call one of the most significant buildings in the district.

Royale officials argue that the city isn't moving quickly enough to create parking in the Ocean Drive area. The firm wants to build a parking garage on the Senator site, which would create private parking for Royale's half-dozen other hotels.

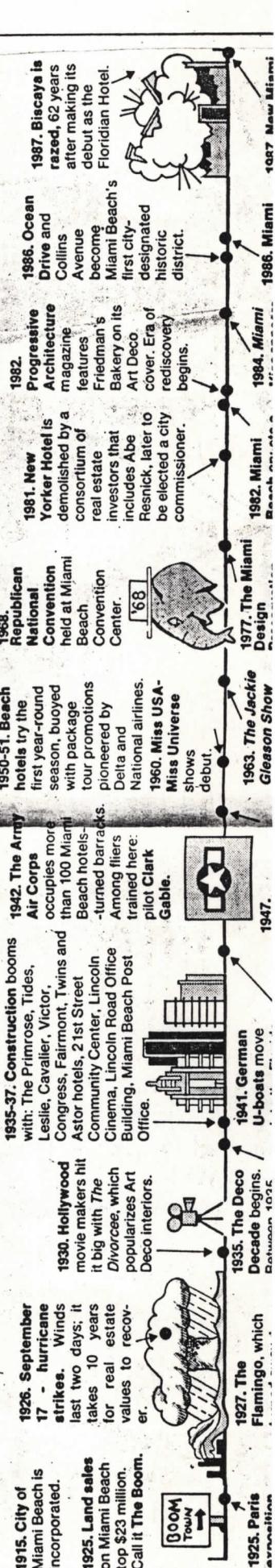
"I can't wait for the city to begin building parking lots," said Jacob Der Hagopian Jr., Royale's executive vice president. "I have too much at stake."

The Senator proposal has not only outraged preservationists, but also has started a debate about whether the city needs a stronger law to protect the key Art Deco buildings.

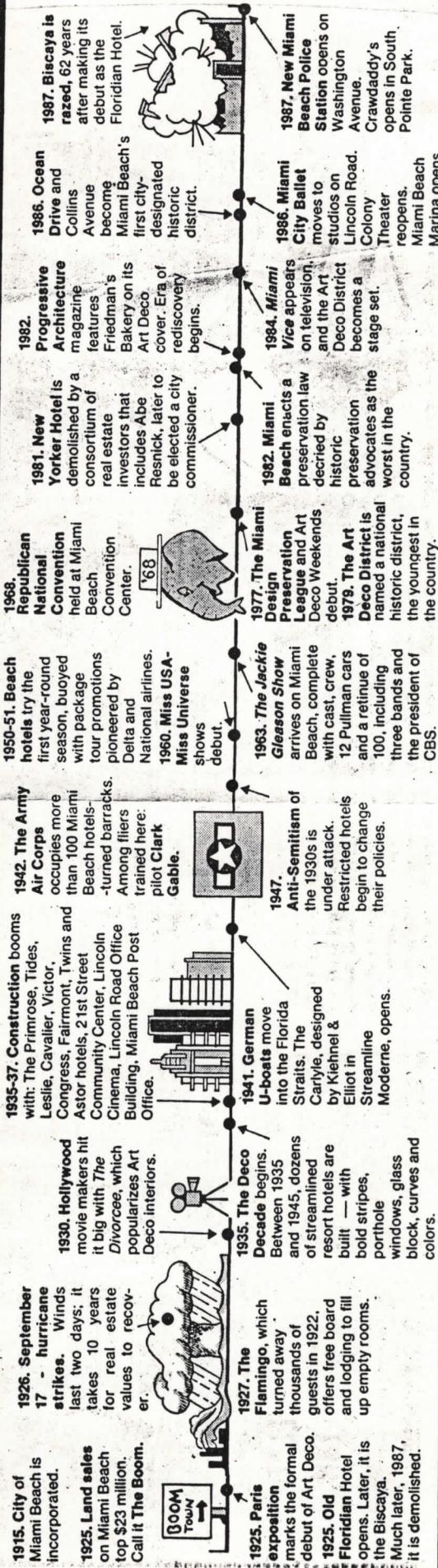
"We're learning that there is almost no protection for historic buildings," said Don Meglin, manager of the restored Waldorf Towers hotel on Ocean Drive.

"Supposedly, we're doing historic restoration here. . . . I can't understand why some of the developers are opposed to stricter preservation laws, but they are. If the Senator goes, what's to stop people from going into Collins Avenue and turning the whole thing into parking garages? That could be the price of success."

MAMI BEACH: A LOOK AT HISTORY THEN AND NOW



Miami Beach: A Look at History Then and Now



The Miami Herald

